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# The Lincoln Digest

Dr. Louis A. Warren, *Editor*

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## LINCOLN, THE POSTMAN

Abraham Lincoln has been designated, among other honorable appelations, as America's most famous postmaster. On May 7, 1833, he was appointed postmaster at New Salem, Illinois, and he served in this capacity until May 30, 1836, when the office was discontinued. It was first established on December 25, 1829, so it was born on Christmas and deceased on what is now Memorial Day.

Under the name of Lincoln's New Salem, the old office, extinct for one hundred and four years, was resurrected on February 12, 1940. The government might well consider this project a memorial to pioneer postmasters.

The New Salem office had a history like many pioneer enterprises which were built on the ever-shifting frontiers of American civilization. The first postmaster at New Salem, Samuel Hill, served but two years and his successor, Isaac P. Chrisman, served a similar length of time, so Lincoln, the third and last encumbent, with only three years to his credit, filled the office longer than either of his predecessors. The office was closed while Lincoln was still the postmaster.

This was not the first closing of a post office which Lincoln had observed. Back in Indiana about a mile from

his home there was established on June 15, 1826, a post office called "Gentry's Store" with Gideon W. Romain as postmaster. There is some evidence that Lincoln served as clerk in the store where the office was located, and this fact may have been a consideration in his New Salem appointment. The Gentry's Store office was discontinued in 1829, and the apparent diminishing population of the community may have had something to do with the removal of the Lincolns to Illinois.

*Laws and Regulations of the Post Office Department*, published in 1843, gives the purpose of the government mail system as follows: "The mails were established for the transmission of intelligence; the articles therefore proper to be sent in them are letters, newspapers, and pamphlets." It would appear that the mail system a hundred years ago was literally a "correspondence school."

Newspapers especially were the most valuable mediums through which the news of the world might be made available to those living in remote places. The postmaster was not only expected to distribute the news on the printed sheets, but he was also obligated to keep those in the community who could not read, well informed as to what was going on in the universe. This fact is well substantiated by correspondence in 1830 from the postal department at Washington to the postmaster at Fort Wayne, Indiana, who was advised that "the advantage of receiving early intelligence of passing events" is one of the important considerations which makes it possible to secure "men of great respectability to act as postmasters."

A copy of Howell's campaign biography was annotated by Lincoln in 1860, and he left standing without correction this comment made by one of Lincoln's friends: "An acquaintance says that the Presidency can never make our candidate happier than the post office did then. He foresaw unlimited opportunities for reading newspapers, and for satisfying his appetite for knowledge."

The story most often told about Lincoln's brief experience in the office at New Salem is his keeping of the

funds left in his hands intact in an old sock until the postal collector called for a settlement. It will be remembered that the exact change was counted out to him by Mr. Lincoln. In handling the monies of the postal department, the offices were known as deposit, draft, and collection post offices. New Salem was a collection office and came under this rule: "Collection offices are those which are required to pay over their net proceeds quarterly to the mail contractor named in their special instructions, upon the production by him, from time to time, of the proper orders and receipts sent to him by the department."

Much emphasis has been placed in the fact that Lincoln would often voluntarily deliver mail, but the postal regulations made it clear that he was under obligation to do so in certain instances. Rule sixty of the postal regulations states with reference to the postmaster: "It is expected that a disposition to accommodate will prompt him to search for and deliver a letter on the application of a person who cannot call in the usual office hours." The rule does not state that a ten cent special delivery fee was to be collected. Lincoln's desire to carry out the spirit of this recommendation may account for the often used story about his carrying mail around in his hat.

The pioneer postmaster may have been the first employee to get the customary time and a half for overtime. When the carrier was due at the post office with the mail between 9:00 P. M. and 5:00 A. M. the postmaster's salary was increased by one-half his original fee.

Apparently Lincoln had to keep the patrons of the office at arms length while he was making up the mail, as it is clearly specified in the postal regulations that "mails may be opened and made up in view of persons not authorized to handle them, but never within their reach."

One of the tasks of the postmaster which was not usually emphasized was the obligation that he was to consider himself "a sentinel of the department." He was especially urged to "keep a vigilant eye" upon the man-

ner in which the mail was transported to and from his office. The rules of the department specified that "if the mail be carried on horseback, he (the carrier) will see that it be covered with an oil cloth or bear skin; if in a stage, that it be carried in a dry boot under the driver's feet, or in a box under the driver's seat." In other words the carrier was to stand or sit on the mail so that no one could get to it without his knowledge.

Possibly Lincoln should have kept a closer watch on his own activities as postmaster, especially as it had to do with the franking privilege. It will be recalled that he franked a letter for a friend in 1835 by placing in the upper right hand corner of the cover, "Free. A. Lincoln, P. M." It is quite apparent that he had no legal right to do this. Custom, then as now, and the habits of his immediate predecessors would largely influence Lincoln's own attitude toward postal regulations. Apparently at this time there was a general abuse of the franking system which was often held out as an incentive to get desirable men.

About nine months after Lincoln franked the letter for his friend Marsh, an act was passed dated July 2, 1836, which stated, "If any person shall frank any letter or letters other than those written by himself, or by his order on the business of his office, he shall on conviction thereof pay a fine of ten dollars."

The post office at Lincoln's New Salem should not only become an important part of the community project developed by the State of Illinois, but it should also memorialize the fine contribution which early postmasters made to the general intelligence of the people on the frontiers.